SDGs ownership key to success

2016 was the year when efforts to implement the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) kicked off around the globe. Many events took place to lay the foundation for their worldwide realization and to start tracking progress. At the dawn of 2017, UN DESA Voice spoke with UN DESA’s Under-Secretary-General Mr. Wu Hongbo about the work carried out so far and efforts that lie ahead to make the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development a reality for everyone.

“If you compare the first year of the SDGs and the first few years of MDGs you see the sharp difference,” Mr. Wu said, describing the contrast between how these two agendas have been received by the international community. “I think the ownership is very important,” Mr. Wu said. “Because the Member States got involved in the negotiations […] right from the beginning, it’s their agenda.”

Right on course to start implementation

In 2016, UN DESA arranged a large number of events to ensure that the SDGs got off to a successful start. One of the main events was the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development, an event which will be held annually to monitor progress of the 2030 Agenda.

“It has been very successful and [it] laid a solid foundation for the future review and follow up,” Mr. Wu said, sharing how for the first time, 22 nations presented efforts being undertaken in their home countries to realize the SDGs.
Commitment to ensure respect, safety and dignity for refugees and migrants

Another milestone was the UN Summit for Refugees and Migrants, which took place on 19 September 2016. “The Summit actually charted the way for the future,” Mr. Wu said, referring to the two global compacts created through the NY Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, as well as the UN Conference on Migration to be held in 2018.

The past year also saw the first ever Global Sustainable Transport Conference, which took place in Turkmenistan on 26-27 November. “We have raised […] the awareness of the importance of sustainable transport and we have produced key messages enshrined in the report and also a list of new commitments,” Mr. Wu said.

Data crucial to track progress

Looking ahead, Mr. Wu described a busy and event filled 2017 for the UN DESA team. First off is the UN World Data Forum, taking place in South Africa on 15-18 January. The event is expected to gather over 1,000 data experts and will feature over 100 sessions to showcase innovative data solutions to improve lives.

Mr. Wu highlighted the importance of getting the data right and how traditional data will not be enough. Instead, to track progress of the 2030 Agenda with its 169 different targets, information needs to be disaggregated.

“For instance, when we talk about people who live in poverty, knowing the number is nothing. You need to have further information. How many of them are still poor because of poor health and very expensive medical care?”

Depending on oceans for our survival

Following a busy spring in 2017 with events including the ECOSOC Forum on Financing for Development and the 2nd Global Infrastructure Forum; June will feature two major events – the Ocean Conference and the launch of a new Public Service Forum.

“Of the global surface, over 70 percent is covered by water, either salty or fresh, without which we will lose our basic conditions for survival,” Mr. Wu said. It is against this backdrop that the United Nations will arrange the Ocean Conference at UN Headquarters in New York on 5-9 June. As Conference Secretary-General, Mr. Wu leads the efforts preparing for this event.

Making a difference

Towards the end of our interview, we discussed how UN DESA’s work makes a difference for people around the world. Mr. Wu pointed to the long history of the department, spanning over seven decades, serving Member States to promote economic, social and sustainable development, a milestone which will also be celebrated in 2017.

“What is important is the right to development, economically and socially,” Mr. Wu said, giving examples of how long term capacity building efforts that stimulate job growth and improved living conditions, can help make a difference for people.

“I think that with the solid foundation laid in the past several years, the DESA colleagues in my department are more confident than ever before that we together with Member States can promote economic and social development in a sustainable way, and certainly, we will do our best to make a difference,” Mr. Wu said.

For more information:
Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
UN World Data Forum
The Ocean Conference
UN World Data Forum to boost innovation and partnerships for better data in support of the 2030 Agenda

On 15-18 January 2017, the first-ever United Nations World Data Forum will bring more than 1,000 participants from national statistical offices, international organizations, national governments, civil society organizations, the business community, as well as research and academia to Cape Town, South Africa.

The Forum will be a unique opportunity for the data and statistics communities to collaborate, launch new initiatives, and develop innovative solutions to deliver better data for sustainable development.

A large number of partners are collaborating to organize over 100 sessions, ranging from interactive data labs and learning spaces to panel discussions and keynote presentations on topics like: the modernization of institutions, governance and business processes for production of data and statistics; the empowerment of citizens to support their own development through data; new technologies and approaches to work with big data, citizen-generated data and geospatial information; the role of open data principles to support follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda; and much more.

“I am confident that the first UN World Data Forum will generate fruitful collaboration across the statistics and data communities, and cutting edge practical solutions to current challenges,” said Mr. Wu Hongbo, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, who heads the Secretariat for the Forum.

“I also hope it will boost political and financial support and partnerships for improving statistics and data capacity in many countries, to harness the power of data for the public good and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.”

All participants will have a platform to contribute their ideas and participate in discussions and parallel events on how to:

- Mobilize resources and build new partnerships to strengthen financial, human, and institutional capacities for the transformation and modernization of national statistical systems;

- Develop innovative approaches to produce data and statistics through the integration of traditional and new data sources, such as the incorporation of administrative records, geospatial information, big data, and citizen-generated data into mainstream policy analysis;
• Harness the power of the data revolution to ensure that progress is monitored by accurately counting everybody everywhere, but especially the poorest and most vulnerable groups, on the basis of sufficiently disaggregated data;

• Facilitate a deeper understanding of the world for everyone, through high-quality data and statistics, from government policy-makers and to individual citizens in their everyday life, in order to achieve sustainable development results at all levels;

• Discuss principles and governance mechanisms to ensure the quality of the data being collected to monitor the many aspects of sustainable development, and to empower public participation and transparency in the overall process, with full consideration of privacy rights;

• Agree on the way forward to meet the data needs of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as well as the participation of all stakeholder groups through inclusive global, regional and national partnerships.

The first UN World Data Forum will be hosted by Statistics South Africa, with support from the Statistics Division of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. The Forum is organized under the guidance of the UN Statistical Commission and the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination, and Capacity-Building for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in close consultation with UN Member States and international partners.

A group of leading data experts — representing national statistical systems, the private sector, civil society, the UN system, and the scientific and academic communities — are collaborating to shape the Forum’s substantive programme.

For more information:
UN World Data Forum

Unlocking the potential of young people

Around the world today, many young people find themselves to be among those being left behind either because they are working for a low wage, or underemployed or unemployed. So how can the potential for a new generation of young people be unlocked? This is where the Youth Forum of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) comes in.

The sixth-annual ECOSOC Youth Forum, being held from 30 to 31 January 2017, will allow representatives of youth-led and youth-focused organizations and networks to initiate a dialogue with Member States. The sessions will feature SDG Youth Advocates, YouTubers and social media influencers and participants. It will also
include Ministers, UN Youth Advocates, and representatives from the Permanent Missions to the UN, youth delegates and many more.

The ultimate goal of the event is to explore ways and means of promoting youth development and engagement in a globalized society, facing many challenges.

One of these is youth unemployment. As more jobs continue to be lost to automation, and as wages remain stagnant or decrease, the international community is also witnessing a trend towards more widespread nationalism and isolation. The Forum therefore takes place at a critical time in history, as the world is struggling to respond to the negative effects of globalization.

“You meet at a critical time for your future,” Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in a message for the 2016 Youth Assembly. “Our objectives are ambitious but simple: a life of dignity, security and opportunity for all. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals are a tapestry of priorities for collective action for people, planet, prosperity, partnership and peace.”

The Forum will also reflect the diversity of youth organizations. This includes balanced representation of youth from developed and developing countries, as well as ensuring representation from the rural, indigenous and the disabled community.

“To harness the power of young people, however, we must recognize the role of young people and their organizations, and encourage them to take action across all areas crucial for the implementation of the Agenda, including in politics, business, academia and civil society,” said ECOSOC President, Ambassador Frederick Shava, at the 9th International Young Leaders Assembly. “Our institutions must reflect the diversity of our constituencies”.

The meeting will be webcast and participants will be encouraged to share questions via social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter using the hashtag #Youth2030.

For more information:
2017 ECOSOC Youth Forum

Steps to Sustainability:
2017

In 2017, UN DESA will celebrate 7 decades of assisting governments in economic and social affairs. Over the past year, we have dedicated ourselves to the successful implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, the universal blueprint for creating a world that is inclusive for all.

The start of the New Year is a great opportunity to reevaluate whether there are things we can do to contribute to the success of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

From across UN DESA’s divisions, we have received suggestions to implement in our daily lives to make 2017 our most sustainable year yet.
UN DESA’s Division on Sustainable Development made a proposal to eat less meat. Reducing our meat intake is one of the easiest ways to quickly reduce our carbon footprint, including water usage. If becoming fully vegetarian or even vegan is too much to expect, implementing “Meatless Mondays” is a great first step to reduce our meat consumption, plus a good a good way to discover new recipes.

In general, being a more responsible consumer is a big step towards being a more sustainable citizen. Before you make a purchase, ask yourself the questions: “Do I really need this? What will be the positive or negative impact of my purchase?” Knowing who you do business with can mean the difference between purchasing an item that was made by child laborers or as a part of a women empowerment programme. For more information on how to be a sustainable consumer, check out SDG 12.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) celebrated its 10th anniversary in December 2016. A milestone that paves the way to make the world truly inclusive to people with a disability, if everyone takes responsibility for their own community. UN DESA’s Division for Social Policy and Development encourages everyone to become acutely aware of accessibility: Look around you. Put yourself in someone else’s shoes: What if you were blind, or deaf? Would you still be able to navigate places effectively? Is this place accessible for people in a wheelchair? Raise awareness and take action if the places you go are not truly inclusive to everyone.

In 2017, the UN is putting the world’s oceans in the spotlight at the UN Conference to Support the Implementation of SDG 14 – Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development. It is a good opportunity for all of us to take a good look at how we can make smarter choices for our oceans. A good way to protect the oceans is to use less plastic. Reuse plastic bags and containers, decline plastic cutlery when ordering takeout and bring your own bag to the supermarket for produce. Plastic pollution is one of the most devastating threats to our waters.

UN DESA’s Division for Public Administration and Development Management encourages us to look at 2017 as an opportunity to create more responsible public institutions. Always being honest and transparent at work is a solid step in the right direction.

As we look into how we will shape our 2017, taking into consideration what we want to give to future generations and how we can leave no one behind will make us all more responsible citizens, and set the world on a path to sustainable development for all.

For more information:
Sustainable Development Goals
Role of oceans and seas for our future

In June 2017, the international community will come together at the Ocean Conference to find ways to conserve and protect our oceans and seas for future generations. Why are they so crucial for our survival? We asked expert Dr. Marjo Vierros, who works as a consultant for UN DESA on issues related to Sustainable Development Goal 14. She is also the Director of Coastal Policy and Humanities Research, which undertakes interdisciplinary research on priority oceans issues.

What is the state of oceans and seas around the world today?

“Over the past decades human activities in the oceans have increased exponentially and this has had serious negative consequences on the state of the oceans. Scientists are seeing greater change, happening faster, with more rapid declines in ocean health than had been previously anticipated. Today we live in the age of a changing climate, and no part of the ocean is unaffected by human influence. Some areas, particularly near large population centres are strongly impacted by multiple pressures.

The threats facing the oceans are many and include unsustainable and destructive fishing practices, illegal and unreported fishing, pollution from both land-based and ship-based sources, habitat destruction, introduction of invasive species, ocean noise, ship strikes, mining of minerals and extraction of oil and gas. These adverse impacts act cumulatively with global impacts from ocean acidification, ocean warming, shifting currents, reduced mixing and decreasing oxygen levels. While marine ecosystems and species might be able to withstand one type or intensity of impact, they are much more severely affected by a combination of impacts. The total impact can often be greater than the sum of its parts. The declining health of the ocean has dire consequences for people, their livelihoods and entire economies, with the poorest communities that rely on ocean resources often being the most impacted.

Cumulative impacts cannot effectively be managed individually and in isolation. Multiple stressors call for integrated management, which means that we need to urgently develop a more holistic approach to ocean governance. The sectoral management of old will not be enough to address the escalating degradation of the oceans. The need to understand and manage the interactions and cumulative effects of multiple stressors has been identified as one of the most important questions in marine ecology today.”

Why are oceans crucial for our survival?

“Two thirds of the Earth's surface is ocean, and the oceans not only provide home to an enormous wealth of plants and animals, from the largest animal in the world (the blue whales) to microscopic bacteria and viruses, but they also support life on Earth. Oceans produce half the oxygen we breathe, absorb about 95% of the sun's radiation, and are by far the largest carbon sink in the world. So even if you happen to live far away from the coast, you still depend on the oceans for your survival.

Fish from the oceans is a major source of animal protein for a large portion of the world’s population. This is particularly true in developing countries and Small Island
Developing States, where fisheries, particularly small-scale fisheries, is an important component of food security.

And because we know so little about the oceans, with vast remote areas like the deep sea still poorly explored, the potential for discovery of new species is vast. We also know very little about the microbial ocean, though it has been estimated that 95% of ocean life by weight is microscopic. All this biological diversity has proven to be an important source of novel genes and natural products with potential applications for the development of pharmaceuticals, enzymes, cosmetics and other products. Several anti-cancer and other medications, as well as the HIV drug AZT were originally sourced from marine organisms. So it is possible that the next life-saving drug will come from the sea, too. We don’t want to destroy that biodiversity before we even discover it.

And finally, the oceans have values that are intangible, but no less crucial for humans. By this I mean aesthetic, spiritual and recreational values, for example. The oceans inspire us and make us happier. You only have to look at kids playing on the beach or an artist painting a stormy sea to know that the values provided by the oceans go beyond just our survival to enriching and nourishing our lives.

How do they contribute to the global economy?

"I would argue that oceans are a key component of sustainable development. Approximately 80 per cent of the volume of world trade is carried by sea, meaning that international shipping and ports are an essential component of global supply-chains. Submarine cables crossing the ocean floor carry 90 per cent of our electronic communications. Marine fisheries contribute more than US$270 billion to global GDP. Fisheries are also major component of the economies of many coastal and island countries, and a provider of livelihoods for the 300 million people who work in the sector. Approximately 3 billion people globally rely on fish as an important source of animal protein, essential micronutrients and omega-3 fatty acids. Other industries, such as oceans-related tourism, and, increasingly, aquaculture are also important for many countries' economies.

There is also a potential for countries to benefit from many new oceans-related industries. For example, ocean energy, such as offshore wind, wave, ocean thermal conversion and tidal power has the potential to increasingly provide us with a renewable energy in the future. This is particularly important for Small Island Developing States, which are currently very dependent on fuel imports. The rich biological diversity in the oceans, and the potential for discovery of new, commercially-important compounds to be used in medicines and other products, means that bioprospecting and biotechnology could become an important part of a many countries' sustainable ocean economies. With capacity building, technology transfer and research collaborations, developing countries could become active participants in this sector, giving them options that are more environmentally and socially sustainable than deep-sea mining, for example.

All these ecosystem services that the oceans provide humankind have considerable economic value. While there is much debate about valuation methods and exact figures, marine ecosystem services have been found to be on the order of trillions of US dollars annually. The economic value of mangroves globally for coastal protection, fisheries, tourism and other human uses are of the order of US$186 million each year. And the value of coral reefs to humankind has been estimated to be between US$130,000 and $1.2 million per hectare, per year. These calculations take into account the services provided by coral reefs in relation to food, raw materials, ornamental resources, climate regulation, moderation of extreme events, waste treatment, water purification, biological control, cultural services (including tourism), and maintenance of genetic diversity. Understanding the magnitude of the value of these ecosystem services helps us make the case for their conservation.

How will Sustainable Development Goal 14 help address current challenges?

"We know that the oceans are vital for our survival, and that they are facing multiple and rapidly accelerating human pressures that are hugely reducing ocean health, resilience and ability to support human lives and livelihoods. The oceans are nearing
the limit of their carrying capacity, if they haven’t reached it already. Yet, the oceans have often been ignored in international policy, and in the public perception they are commonly “out of sight and out of mind”.

So SDG 14, with its set of comprehensive and interlinked targets, provides an opportunity to put a spotlight on the oceans, and to accelerate the actions that need to be taken to restore and maintain their resilience. Trying to prioritize these actions will also provide us with an opportunity to have a global dialogue about what we can collectively do to move towards a more sustainable life. What solutions have worked and could be scaled up? What can different cultures and knowledge systems teach us about intergenerational responsibility and stewardship for ocean resources? How can developing countries build capacities to fully benefit from sustainable ocean economies? These are some of the questions that SDG 14 will force us to examine, and perhaps together we can come up with a roadmap for action that can reverse the current trend of biodiversity loss in the oceans. Inaction is much more costly than action and can lead to greater and likely irreversible losses.”

What do you hope the upcoming UN Oceans Conference in June 2017 will accomplish?

“Achieving SDG 14 and its targets will require collective, global and urgent action. We need to mobilize and learn from each other’s experiences, from the latest science and the wisdom of traditional knowledge. We need to link scales in ocean conservation from local community-based management to large-scale conservation in marine areas beyond national jurisdiction. We need to build trust amongst all ocean stakeholders, which essentially encompasses all of humanity, and form partnerships that include governments, civil society, scientists, Indigenous Peoples and coastal communities. We need to mobilize a substantial amount of funding that is sustainable in the long term. We also need to pay close attention to equity and make sure we empower those whose voices are not always heard in intergovernmental processes. I hope that the UN Oceans Conference in June 2017 will help us get started with all of these things, and that its focus on strengthening and building the partnerships will help us develop a common vision for a way forward. I also hope that there will be concrete commitments from governments towards ocean conservation. No country or group can do this alone, but if we manage to collaborate effectively and inclusively we can make progress. We already have tools and methodologies for ocean conservation, and can learn more as we apply them. We now need strong leadership and commitment to move towards a more sustainable relationship with the oceans.”

For more information:
United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14
Project for solar-powered vessels receives $1 million UN Energy Grant

A partnership working to promote solar-powered electric vessels in Tunisia and in the Middle East and North Africa was awarded the one million US dollars 2016 Energy Grant from UN DESA on 14 December. The project “Solar Fuelled Electric Maritime Mobility” by SINTEF, an independent non-profit research institute based in Norway, seeks to demonstrate the feasibility and the social, economic and environmental benefits of solar-fuelled electric boat transport in Tunisia and the wider region.

SINTEF is implementing this demonstration project with the National Agency for Energy Conservation of Tunisia. “We are extremely honoured to receive this grant from the United Nations, rewarding SINTEF for leadership and innovative practices in energy for sustainable development. Our vision is ‘Technology for a better society’, and it is essential to develop new and innovative energy solutions to succeed”, said Alexandra Bech Gjorv, CEO of SINTEF, at the award ceremony. She added that the project in Tunisia combines many of SINTEF’s research areas, like marine technology, solar energy, power systems and future transport systems.

SINTEF will use the grant to develop technology for a traditional ferry or other vessel with a plug-in hybrid electric powertrain and to construct an electric charging point. It will help also support data collection and analysis. Selection of the vessel in Tunisia to be used for the demonstration will be decided in the first phase of the project.

The project aims to generate the data and evidence needed to replicate sustainable transport in the region. It seeks to demonstrate the benefits of low cost electric vessels as key transport between coastal cities in the region, with a view to encouraging other stakeholders to implement such transport on a larger scale. This would in turn benefit in particular the low and middle income parts of the population. The project will also contribute to the avoidance of transport related greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution, and it will help to prevent and reduce marine pollution.

Furthermore, the project will conduct capacity development workshops for Tunisian and other regional stakeholders, the preparation of a Tunisian Nationally Appropriate Mitigation Action (NAMA) to be submitted to the UNFCCC portal, as well as public outreach activities to spread knowledge of this low-cost, sustainable transport solution.

The Tunisian National Agency for Energy Conservation has well established projects and partners in the electricity sector and universities, as well as a track-record in
NAMAs for the electricity sector. SINTEF is a leading institution in the development of renewable energy production and storage solutions. It has extensive expertise in solar and wind energy, energy regulation and storage, grid integration of renewable energy, maritime transport and maritime technologies.

“The transport sector is responsible for nearly a quarter of energy-related greenhouse gas emissions. It also has significant public health impacts,” said Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon at the award ceremony. “The answer is not less transport – it is sustainable transport. We need transport systems that are environmentally friendly, efficient, affordable, and accessible,” he said.

UN General Assembly President Peter Thomson said the “Powering the Future We Want” programme is a “creative initiative that promotes and funds innovative activities related to sustainable energy – an issue that goes to the heart of achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.” He added, “it is vital to our efforts to move towards a sustainable future that we establish transport systems that are smart, clean, affordable, and powered by clean energy.”

Under-Secretary-General Wu Hongbo expressed deep gratitude to all of the finalists, the China Energy Fund Committee, the High-level Steering Committee and the Advisory Council of the Grant. “This Energy Grant is an excellent example of global partnership. Working together, we can make a difference. Today's award bears vivid testimony to that success,” he said.

“We firmly believe that energy belongs to all of us, today and tomorrow. And each and every one of us has the duty to use energy sparingly, wisely and responsibly. By partnering with UN DESA in making this grant possible, the China Energy Fund Committee is sending out a most sincere message of collaboration and partnership to work together finding solutions for energy security by achieving energy sustainability for the entire humanity,” said Dr. Patrick Ho, Secretary-General of the China Energy Fund Committee.

The “Powering the Future We Want” initiative

The UN-DESA Energy Grant is a capacity building initiative launched and managed by UN-DESA, in collaboration with the China Energy Fund Committee, a Hong Kong based NGO in consultative status with ECOSOC. Titled “Powering the Future We Want”, this initiative offers a grant in the amount of one million US dollars to fund capacity development activities in energy for sustainable development. The grant is awarded to an individual, institution or partnership based on past and current achievements in leadership and innovative practices in advancing energy for sustainable development. The 2016 cycle of the grant had as focus “Energy for Sustainable Transport”.

In 2016, the UN-DESA Energy Grant received over 150 applications. The winner has been selected through a rigorous review and objective assessment of these applications, undertaken in multiple stages, guided by an Advisory Council and a High-level Steering Committee. A Grant will be awarded annually from 2015 until 2019.

Winner of the US$1 million 2016 UN-DESA Energy Grant: SINTEF

The eight finalists of the 2016 Grant Cycle, in alphabetical order: Ms. Fiza Farhan; GeWeiss Motors Corporation; KPIT Technologies Limited; Medellin Mayor’s Office-Mobility and Transit Department; Motor Development International SA (MDI SA); South Asian Forum for Environment (SAFE); SINTEF; SNV Netherlands Development Organisation.

For more information:
UN-DESA Energy Grant
Launch of the World Economic Situation and Prospects 2017

The World Economic Situation and Prospects (WESP) 2017 Report will be launched on 17 January at 11 a.m. in New York. In subsequent days, this will be followed by regional launches in major cities around the world. The launch on 17 January will be broadcast live via UN Web TV.

The WESP 2017 report is jointly produced by the UN DESA, the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the five UN regional commissions, with contributions from the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).

The publication features an overview of recent global economic developments and provides growth projections for 2017 and 2018, based on an assessment of the outlook for the developed economies, the economies in transition and the developing economies. The report examines key macroeconomic and development challenges faced by the international community, including issues in the areas of global trade, financing for development, poverty and inequality, and renewable energy.

In the face of high uncertainty and pressing global challenges today, the report highlights several key risks that may derail global growth prospects. The report also discusses a set of policy measures that could help restore robust and balanced growth and facilitate progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

For more information:
World Economic Situation and Prospects
Happy New Year 2017!

UPCOMING EVENTS

15-18 January, Cape Town
   UN World Data Forum

16-20 January, New York
   UNFF Working Group and Special Session

17 January
   Launch of the World Economic Situation and Prospects 2017

30-31 January, New York
   ECOSOC Youth forum

30 January - 8 February, New York
   2017 Regular Session, Committee on NGOs